

The Decline of the Black Panthers

The following is the summation of a report by the House Internal Security Committee on the Black Panther Party, 1966-1971. Its author, Richardson Preyer, a second-term Representative from North Carolina, was the chairman of the investigating subcommittee.

THE BLACK Panther Party, as a national organization, is near disintegration. Its peak membership was never more than 1,500 or 2,000 and the committee hearings document the steady decline in these numbers during the last year. Furthermore, the feud between Eldridge Cleaver and Huey Newton threatens the start of a time of violence and terror within what remains of the Panther Party. Probably only remnants of the party will remain alive here and there to bedevil the police and enchant a few of the young, but its day as a national influence and influence in the black community seems over.

It is hard to believe that only a little over a year ago the Panthers, despite their small number, ranked as the most celebrated ghetto militants. They fascinated the left, inflamed the police, terrified much of America, and had an extraordinary effect on the black community. Even moderate blacks, who disagreed with their violent tactics, felt that the Panthers served a purpose in focusing attention on ghetto problems and argued that they gave a sense of pride to the black community. The Panthers themselves, through their excesses, have done most to destroy this myth, a myth of their own creation. But the steadiness of the "system," the commonsense of the people of this country, deserves credit also: by and large, we in the wider community—black and white—have done a good job in keeping our balance, in separating fact from propaganda, reality from myth, and not overreacting; our police (with a few notable exceptions) have done a good job in keeping their cool in the face of intense provocation. The myth that the police were out to eliminate the Panthers, though swallowed whole by the press, has been laid to rest. The recent trial of 13 New York Black Panthers, in which all were freed, including two who jumped bond because they feared they would not get a fair trial, has given the lie to the charge that they would not receive the usual constitutional protections in court. Most of those liberals and idealists who once sympathized with the Panthers have realized that the Panthers are not so much Robin Hoods as they are hoods, and have withdrawn their support.

THE foregoing report presents an account of the Black Panther Party which is in this spirit of fairness and balance. Some might say it is too sympathetic to the Panthers, for it would be possible, without departing from the facts, to write a real zinger of a report which would carry a stronger sense of outrage than the present report. Such a report would run the risk of making martyrs of the Panthers; a cooler and more balanced report would avoid any possibility of reviving a flagging Panther Party by making available the charge of "oppression." The Panthers wear "oppression" like a badge; it is their excuse for not making it in society—or even trying to make it. It is their too easy excuse for any unlawful or violent act.

In condensing the vast amount of material available on this subject, the report has arrived at a most reasonable perspective. I cannot agree that the report, in the words of the minority view, "is unfair to the police and to the American people." In situation after situation the text demonstrates that Panthers, not policemen, initiated acts of violence resulting in injury or death to themselves, to police officers, and to others.

If it is correct that the Black Panther Party is presently suffering from a terminal illness, then this report may be of historical interest only. Let us hope this is the case. Nevertheless there are some "lessons learned" which apply to all such paramilitary groups based on hate.

This report and the committee's hearings make clear that the purpose of the Panthers is to incite violent revolution, that they are revolutionary radicals, and not reformers. There is a continuing debate as to whether they are purposeful terrorists or mostly big talkers. The latter position is made arguable by the naive character of the Panther organization. They have no doctrine (except a few hand-me-down tags from Marx and Mao Tse-tung), no theory, no tactics, little by way of program. But if we take them at their word, the Panthers convict themselves. They insist their weapons are for self-defense, but they preach organized violence and the overthrow of the "fascist imperialist U.S. gov.

ernment," and plainly consider themselves the violent vanguard of a new American revolution.

It is equally plain that the Panthers are totally incapable of overthrowing our government by violence. But this does not mean that they are merely mischievous children. On the contrary, they are capable of doing a great deal of harm. They turn all too easily to guns in their rage and frustration. They pose a serious physical danger to the police, and their violent language and conduct create a *climate* for revolution, even though the Panthers themselves cannot bring about a revolution. They raise the threshold of violence, making the next outrageous act just a little more acceptable.

Their violent ranting is often excused as "ghetto talk," merely militant rhetoric to get the ghetto's attention. Our society must vigorously resist this idea for words have meaning, and the use of them carries responsibility. If David Hilliard cries, "Kill Nixon," in public, someone who hears him is going to believe him and take it as a command and not merely ghetto talk. In a tense United States, such talk could be a dangerous incitement to psychotic action on the part of others. We must make it clear that free speech is not absolute and that people are responsible for what they say. In this connection, it is hard to see why the Post Office Department tolerates the mailing of the Black Panther paper, a paper filled with the most outrageous statements and cartoons.

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ANOTHER result of Panther activity is the alienation of the young, not only from society as a whole, but also from the black community. The Panthers' guns and leather look, rakish uniform and "off the pigs" lingo has great appeal for the young. And they attack every black leader—I cannot think of an exception no matter how militant—and so destroy any models young blacks might normally develop. The dehumanization of their opponents (opponents are never wrong, they are "pigs," "wife-beaters," "bootlickers," "lackeys," or worse) has affected not only the young. It has also seriously split the adult black community.

One must ask, "Is it the goal of the Panthers to help blacks?" Many were originally drawn to the Panthers for this purpose. We have heard much testimony concerning their disillusionment. Originally the Panthers had some innovative community service ideas: the breakfast program for ghetto children, the idea of a Panther patrol which would arrest blacks to ensure—or to prove the lack of—due process and fair treatment. But the aims quickly shifted from service to the black community to vengeance on the white man. Cleaver says, "The U.S. as it exists must be totally obliterated." This is the spirit of the Panthers. There is no talk of better jobs, more equal educational opportunities, better houses. To the Panther, vengeance is sweeter than any of these things. They would unleash the destructive instincts in man—a very dangerous game to play. They have ended, not as noble Robin Hoods serving the oppressed, but as parasites living off the oppressed community.

How has such an organization been able to flourish in our society? Congressman John Ashbrook has suggested that one reason is that they were glamorized by the press, which treated a shootout with the police as if it might be an exciting 4 to 3 baseball game (four Panthers dead and three police). All of us have probably taken comfort from playing the numbers game ("after all, there are only 1,500 Panthers"): from our belief that they don't mean what they say; and the thought that they can't possibly overthrow the government and so have no effect. But they can do serious damage to the fabric of our society short of revolution.

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THE most serious consequences of their acts, if long continued, would be totally unintended. For the outrages and excesses of the Panthers could cause us to harden our hearts and could serve as an excuse to shut the ghettos out of the range of our concern. If we rightly criticize the violence and lawlessness of the Panthers, we must offer hope and demonstrate progress as alternatives to the ghetto dweller in his misery. We must not become prisoners of our anger, for then the Panthers would have won after all.

We must all realize that if our society is ever forced to choose between tyranny and anarchy, society will choose tyranny—for anarchy is the worst tyranny of all.

Panthers, put down your guns and find your voices.